

Internationalization of Education and the Brain Drain Paradox: Case of the Mena Region

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This paper discusses how the internationalization of higher education has brought about its impact in terms of spreading standardized academic programs, scientific research, innovation, culture exchange, and strengthening ties between involved higher education institutions and countries to resolve mutual benefit challenges. Among these challenges, the brain drain paradox remains an annoying problem for developing countries. The paper sheds light on these related issues through witnessed education system reform, research efforts exchange, and cooperation between collaborating countries in the MENA region to diminish the impact of the brain drain paradox.

Keywords: internationalization of higher education, higher education system reforms, research diversity, brain drain, MENA region

INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education as a result of globalization accepts higher education as a private economic good. However, the emergence of knowledge diplomacy, which has contributed to greater connectivity among students, faculty members, and active researchers across nations, has also led to a new extensive spate of brain drain from less developed countries to more developed ones.

Higher education in developing countries is facing tremendous challenges with respect to globalization. The 1998 UNESCO strategy of internationalization of education, which is viewed as the only pathway to enhance education, scientific research, and innovation, seeks to adopt international standards in all related education academic activities such as teaching, improving academic program curricula, student and faculty exchange, polarization of field experts, acquiring soft communication skills, and seeking international cooperation and partnership in research, education, and training.

Due to the constraints of small populations within Arab Gulf countries and the need to sustain their economic development, these countries seek to attract and recruit skilled and semi-skilled labor from all regions of the world according to advantages of specific regional skills and in all different sectors. By doing

so, Arab Gulf countries have opened their doors to a diversity of immigrants. Among these immigrants are a great number of educators and students that have been integrated at all levels of their education systems.

Such openness has brought about the acquirement of many distinguished scientists and scholars from different backgrounds across the world. This has led these countries to opt for a crucial coexistence and an understanding and appreciation of cultural, racial, and socio-economic diversity. As a result, a well-witnessed paroxysm of rapid economic growth and development has impacting all sectors of the Arab Gulf economies.

Higher education is one of the key sectors that have been affected by such openness to cultural diversity. Great efforts are undertaken by governments of the Arab Gulf countries for the sake of reforming their higher education system within the domain of internationalization of higher education. This paper focuses on keys issues relevant to:

- Impact of internationalization of higher education on higher education system reforms.
- Growing hubs of research diversity.
- Brain drain: the paradox.
- From brain drain to brain gain: a win-win state.
- Conclusion.

METHODS

The study relied on the analytical method using three processes: deconstruction, evaluation, and re-composition. This approach is appropriate for theoretical studies in the fields of Humanities and Social Sciences. Furthermore, it is particularly appropriate for the subject covered by this study. The three processes used are:

- (1) *Deconstruction*: by dismantling aspects of the internationalization of higher education.
- (2) *Evaluation*: evaluating how the internationalization of higher education has brought about its impact in terms of spreading standardized academic programs, scientific research, innovation, culture exchange, and strengthening ties between higher education institutions in countries in the MENA region.
- (3) *Composition*: the reconstruction of the elements of the topic from the perspective of internationalization of higher education and the brain drain paradox, and reinforcing this with established evidence, arguments, and the proof of scientific discussions.

INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND REFORMS

Globalization has been widely accepted as a new *savoir-faire* since the 1990s due to its close ties with changes in political, socio-economic, and cultural facets of today's world. Higher education has not escaped its impact, which is expanding within the realm of the internationalization process.

Higher education (HE) has become an economic tradable commodity of the export sector. For a better capture of the *status quo*, Hantian Wu proposes: "Inward-oriented higher education Internationalization," implies the process and activities of learning from foreign knowledge, cultures, HE models, and norms through HE Internationalization "Outward-oriented higher education Internationalization" refers to the process and activities of exporting domestic knowledge, culture, HE models, and norms to the world through HE Internationalization, primarily for the sake of soft power enhancement." (Wu & Zha, 2018, p. 2).

However, Jane Knight advanced a typology of higher education internationalization in terms of "internationalization at home" and "cross-border education." The former includes "the intercultural and international dimension in the teaching/learning process, research, extracurricular activities, relationships with local cultural and ethnic community groups, and integration of foreign students and scholars" (Deardorff et al., 2012). Here, the latter "refers to the movement of people, programs, providers, policies, knowledge, ideas, projects, and services across national boundaries" (Deardorff et al., 2012, p. 457).

In a more precise perspective, Altbach and Knight (Altbach & Knight, 2007) identify the motive for higher education internationalization as either to earn a financial profit or non-financial profit. For-profit educational institutions deliver education services and recruit international students by prestigious universities “to earn profits by charging high fees” (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Those seeking non-financial profit are usually traditional universities seeking to improve “research and knowledge capacity and to increase cultural understanding” (Altbach & Knight, 2007). More, prestigious universities in developed countries “use international programs to provide international and cross-cultural perspectives for their own students and to enhance their curricula” (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p. 293).

With respect to the European perspective in the internationalization of higher education (IMPI, 2012), five main goals are prescribed: 1) to enhance the quality of education; 2) to enhance the quality of research; 3) to prepare students effectively for life and work in an intercultural and globalized world; 4) to enhance the international reputation and visibility of the unit; and 5) to provide a service to society and for community social engagement.

It is apparent that a common feature is present in different typologies of internationalization. There is, mainly, an interaction between domestic and foreign matters related to higher education with respect to knowledge, scientific research, and cultural understanding within a supported diversity. Thus, higher education has been transformed into a strategic sector within the realm of globalization and the knowledge economy, paving a fundamental way for a socio-economic and cultural change on a global scale.

According to Barbosa and Neves:

...due to the expansion and massification, HEIs had their role multiplied and became complex organizations facing new challenges in the spheres of management, governance, academic administration, education provision, student services, research administration, infrastructure facilities management, financial matters...Higher education policy, in this context, has become a field of great social and political interest as well as of debates and issues. (de Oliveira Barbosa & Neves, 2020, p.23)

Such transformation is stressed in UNESCO’s World Conference on Higher Education (1998), held in Paris:

The growing internationalization of higher education is first and foremost a reflection of the global character of learning and research. This universal context is being reinforced by the current processes of economic and political integration, the growing need for intercultural understanding and the global nature of modern communications, consumer markets, etc. The ever-expanding number of students, teachers and researchers who study, teach, undertake research, live, and communicate in an international context attests to this overall welcome development. (UNESCO, 1995, p. 33)

From a chronological perspective, De Wit asserts:

From a historical point of view, ‘international education’ reflects the period between the Second World War and the end of the Cold War and is more strongly observed in the United States than elsewhere. The ‘Internationalization of higher education’ reflects the period starting with the end of the Cold War, and is more predominant in Europe, as well as Australia and Canada. (De Wit, 2001, p. xi)

Knight reviewed her definition of internationalization of higher education in an expanded manner: “The process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education”. (Knight, 2004, p. 11).

Thus, a noticeable change is apparent currently in the internationalization dimension of higher education, where emphasis is placed on international cooperation in terms of scientific research through

research projects, doctoral scholarships, and mobility of teachers and students. The internationalization of higher education is taken as a strategic factor in the development of higher education institutions for the sake of gaining an outstanding reputation and recognition, thereby enticing pecuniary interest in the future.

Such change is laid down within the European perspective of internationalization of higher education through the 2018 Internationalization Report in Europe produced by the European Association for International Education, where the main goals of internationalization for the involved European higher education institutions are as follows:

The main objectives of internationalization that emerged were as follows: preparing students for the global world 76 per cent, improving the quality of education 65 per cent, institutional reputation/competitiveness 53 per cent, improving the quality of research 38 per cent, financial benefit 12 per cent, better service the local community 11 per cent...In total, 81 per cent of the surveyed HEIs reported that they consider the future of Internationalization to be positive or very positive, while only 4 per cent were skeptical. (Sandström & Hudson, 2018, p. 46)

A notable aspect of today's internationalization of higher education is the mobility of international students, faculty members, researchers, and even administrators in charge of Internationalization Offices. There is no denial for the contribution of those agents in the economic, political, social, and cultural development and growth of the involved country partners.

This brings us to the concept of knowledge diplomacy advanced by Knight (Knight, 2015, 2020) *in lieu* of cultural diplomacy and soft power, and focuses on the mutuality of international higher education in understanding the interrelation between higher education and international relations. Jane Knight (Knight, 2020) defines knowledge diplomacy in a revised version as:

Knowledge diplomacy is a two-way process. It refers to the role that international higher education, research, and innovation (IHERI) play in building and strengthening international relations and, vice versa, the role that international relations play in facilitating and improving IHERI. (Knight, 2020, p. 38)

Jane Knight (Knight, 2020), discusses the key characteristics of knowledge diplomacy by emphasizing:

Focus on fundamental functions of higher education-teaching/learning research, knowledge production and innovation, and service to society. This is done through usual international activities but such activities are networked at larger scale by involving multiple actors and strategies. (Knight, 2020, p. 38)

- *Diversity of actors and partners:* Knowledge diplomacy comprises a diversity of actors. The key actors are universities and colleges along with research institutions, foundations, and professional associations. These institutions are private or public at national, regional, and international scale. Common partners take account of industry, civil society groups, foundations, and governmental agencies. "A key feature of knowledge diplomacy is therefore a diversity of higher education actors working collaboratively with partners from other sectors." (Knight, 2020, p. 38)
- *Mutual reciprocity but with different benefits:* The author acknowledges different benefits for different partners due to their different needs and resources. The principle of mutuality and reciprocity of benefits will guide the process of negotiations and conflict resolution between partners. The win-win approach is fundamental to knowledge diplomacy.
- *Build and strengthen ties between and among countries:* Knowledge diplomacy may bring breadth and depth to international relations by addressing persistent global issues common to

all countries. There is an enormous gap between developed and developing countries in the pursuit of scientific research and its application, and access to higher learning.

Also, there is no denial that diversity is pivotal in terms of cooperation and partnership between and among countries. Universities and research centers are playing an increasing role as ambassadors. They become an exchange vehicle in the flow of people and knowledge transmission, and create strong ties between countries.

It seems that modern universities in the realm of internationalization of higher education are conducting their own contributions to diplomatic relations in a complementary role to the country diplomacy, particularly in terms of knowledge dissemination, research partnership, and cultural understanding. Such partnerships, networks development, building ties with business communities, and alliances with international players are manifested in diverse activities by people of diverse ethnicity and multiple backgrounds, which seem to bring people to a common destiny rather than a divergent one.

Universities, research centers, and other institutions are becoming the foundation and diversity incubator for the international higher education.

The MENA region encountered European university models throughout the period of colonization. However, the expansion of Western education in this region, particularly in the Arab Gulf countries, has been appreciable with the emergence of internationalization of higher education. The appeal is necessarily in line with their devotion to extend higher education to all segments of their population, the requirements of needs of the labor market, and the socio-economic provisions as they strive toward rapid economic development.

In response to this task, transnational higher education programs have been introduced in the region. These programs have flourished in scope, volume, and complexity. UAE and Qatar were pioneers in attracting internationalized higher education by establishing host education cities for international branches of distinguished universities to operate in higher education host local markets. The introduction of these international programs of higher education has been in response to a combination of political, economic, socio-cultural, and academic factors (Childress, 2009). Political factors remain tied to the events of September 11, 2001, making student mobility difficult due to visa rejection; these factors emphasize the importance of making students more aware of world culture and providing students with skills to address issues related to foreign policy and national security. Economic factors are related to seeking suitable or international job opportunities. These factors emphasize the preparation of students for careers in their countries or at international scale, and for the sake of their contribution into the process of their country's economic development. Socio-cultural factors stress the need to develop students' soft skills, such as intercultural communication skills, leadership and entrepreneurship in order to address problems that may arise as a result of incorporating people from different social, ethical, religious, and educational and cultural backgrounds. Students are expected to understand and react to people's behavior from different countries and cultures (Childress, 2009).

There is no denial for the pronounced role that transnational higher education is manifesting in the economic, cultural, and social development of Arab countries. There is a growth of partnerships and opening of branches, particularly in UAE, Qatar, Egypt, and Jordan. In UAE, for example, the American University of Dubai opened in 1995. The University of Sharjah, a branch campus for the American University in Washington D.C., opened in 1997. For diversity of higher education, other notable universities entered the UAE market, such as the French Paris-Sorbonne University in Abu Dhabi, the Australian Wollongong University in Dubai, New York University in Abu Dhabi, and Michigan State in Dubai. The rationale and the diversity pushing for such expansion and growth in the UAE higher education market may be belief in the possibility of transferable successful educational experiences of these institutions, in their native countries to their international branches (Franklin & Alzouebi, 2014). Furthermore, due to the high level of ethnic diversity in Dubai, which has more than 200 different ethnic nationalities, UAE has invested great efforts to gain a share of the international market in higher education and to compete with emerging economies like India, China, and Malaysia by partnering with top research-oriented universities. Many universities of ethnically diverse countries, such as the UK, India, and Australia, operate in the free zones of Dubai International Academic City and the Knowledge Village in Dubai (Datta & Vardhan, 2017). These

institutions appeal to the high demand of national and expatriate resident students as well as international students. Their diversity fulfills the demand for ethnic diversity in UAE's higher education system.

The multicultural ethnicity of communities encountered at branches of foreign universities operating in the Arab Gulf countries has opened room for better communication, networking, and understanding other culture among the Gulf population composed of diverse expatriates and nationals.

GROWING HUBS OF RESEARCH DIVERSITY

While Arab North African countries enjoyed successful experiences in higher education reforms and related activities during the 1970s and early 1980s, the internationalization of higher education nowadays provides ample opportunities for Arab Gulf countries to embark on their higher education system reforms within international standards and to compete for the sake of gaining a share in the international higher education market.

Transnational education is transferred through three different forms: distance education, branch campus, and partner-supported delivery in joint venture. According to Wilkins (Wilkins, 2011), the Arab Gulf countries "have been the largest recipients of transnational higher education globally, whilst Australia, the UK, and USA have been the largest providers" (Wilkins, 2011, p. 73).

UAE hosts over 40 international branch campuses, which represents almost one-quarter of all international branch campuses worldwide (Becker, 2015). The University of Wollongong (Australia) was the first foreign university to be accredited by the UAE Ministry of Higher Education and has operated in Dubai since 1993. It offers undergraduate as well as graduate programs (MBA and PhD). Private higher education institutions in the UAE are required to be licensed by the Commission of Academic Accreditation (CAA) and then to seek accreditation individually from the mother institution for branch campuses. Private higher education institution ownership remains in the hands of government (individual Emirates), local nationals or organizations, and foreign higher education institutions. International branch campuses in Dubai recruit most of their student enrollment from local expatriate communities of Indian, Pakistani, and Iranian origins. The international branch campuses of New York University Abu Dhabi, which was established in 2010, Paris-Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi, which started operations in 2006, and recently, the newly founded Mohammed Bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence, which has been established in a joint Artificial Intelligence program with Weizmann Institute of Science, rely on globally attracting the highest-caliber international students by offering them attractive scholarships for tuition and fees in order to conduct and advance scientific research activities.

The Sultanate of Oman and Saudi Arabia opted for private universities with foreign partnership instead of opening international branch campuses.

The leading state universities of Saudi Arabia have moved toward a strategy of enlarged international collaboration (Onsman, 2010). In fact, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology has embarked globally into collaborative ventures with 27 universities and has created five international academic excellence alliances (Corbyn, 2009).

Most of the private higher education institutions in Oman are joint ventures owned by the Omani government, Omani citizens, and foreign higher education institutions mainly from Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and US. Bahrain and Kuwait have limited their access to transnational higher education and have together engaged in a joint venture to build a "higher education city" in Bahrain in order to attract international branch campuses. Box Hill Institute, Australia, opened its branch campus in Kuwait in 2007. In 2003, the Kuwait Maastricht Business School was established with the support of the Maastricht School of Management (The Netherlands).

Qatar is also a country with international branch campuses and has witnessed a successful experience in higher education since the establishment of the Qatar Foundation in 1995. The foundation aims at promoting and seeking quality of higher education, devoted scientific research, and providing community engagement services. Qatar Foundation has recruited many US-based branches and others since 2010. Weill-Cornell Medical School and Texas A&M University were established to offer medical and engineering programs while Carnegie Mellon University was established to deliver programs in business

and computer sciences. The renowned French business school, HEC Paris, was recruited by the Foundation to provide MBA programs in executive and certificate tracks, and to engage in business-related research. University College London announced the establishment of its campus at Education City for the sake of delivering programs and conducting research in archaeology, conservation, and museum studies.

Finally, there is no denial that foreign universities or their branches operating in the Gulf States have contributed to the improvement of higher education institutions as a result of competition and alignment of these institutions with local quality assurance standards derived from international procedures and international accreditation bodies' processes embraced by local governments.

BRAIN DRAIN: THE PARADOX

Brain drain is defined in the context of this paper as the migration of highly skilled labor in search of better conditions of living and quality of life, and more stable socio-economic and political conditions, and arises from changes in the higher education industry brought about the internationalization of higher education within the context of globalization.

Although migration is an old phenomenon dating back to the dawn of human history, the emerging new world economic order under the auspices of globalization, the rapid development of the information and communication technology (ICT) sector, and the intensity of knowledge production and scientific research sharing, reinforce the migration of highly skilled personnel from developing to developed countries. It seems that the spread of internationalization of higher education has offered ample opportunities for the brain drain phenomenon to arise. Transnational education spread has contributed to brain drain from developing to developed countries in the professional categories, mainly medical personnel, engineers, teachers, and a portion of post-graduate students.

The quality of education along the acquired foreign language of learning provided by international branch campuses which opened in some developing countries, promise high employability prospects for their students on international markets. Such a situation contributed to make high-skill migration to become the dominant pattern of international migration as a consequence of internationalization of education. According to Docquier et al. "...empirical analyses of the determinants of high-skilled emigration show that poor economic performance and its correlates (such as rampant poverty, bad institutions, discriminations, political repression, etc.) are all important determinants of emigration and of high-skill emigration in particular". (Docquier & Rapoport, 2011, p. 52)

Studies by the Arab League, UNESCO, and the World Bank affirm that the MENA region and Arab World's contribution to the brain drain phenomenon from developing countries is about one-third. The different professions affected by the brain drain are doctors (50%), engineers (23%), and other faculties(15%). The migration of highly skilled information and communication technology (ICT) professionals from North African countries to the European continent is the latest wave of brain drain. According to a World Bank (2018) report, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region loses around 10,000 skilled ICT professionals each year. It seems that such outward migration of those skilled professionals is prompted by the lack of creating proper and matching ICT jobs in the region. France and Germany, which have more developed ICT sectors, are the greatest beneficiaries of this brain drain occurrence.

With respect to these country destinations of MENA region migrants, there are significant historical and geographical reasons behind their move. The ex-colonial powers have left their impact. For example, most of migrants from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Mauritania migrate toward France, whereas migrants from ex-British colonies, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq prefer English speaking countries, e.g., the UK, US, Canada, and Australia. Gulf countries are the preferred destination of many highly skilled workers originating from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and a few from North African countries. Arab Gulf countries, which are historical importers of skilled and unskilled labor, have become since the 1990s a migration destination for North African countries, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and other Arab countries. The reason for this is the astonishingly successful results of the Arab Gulf countries' planned growth and development achievements.

There is no denial that the socio-economic, cultural, and political environments within home countries of the developing world play a great role in motivating people to emigrate in pursuit of better opportunities of employability and better living conditions, particularly the skilled fraction. However, the internationalization of education has changed societal perception of an educational degree acquired from an international branch campus and this is seen as leeway to global job opportunities in today's globalized economies. This perception of high value on foreign education and language has provided strong motivation for professionals and students to seek a living opportunity and education abroad.

Brain drain is also related to the deplorable state and mismanagement of higher education systems in developing countries, which has caused many students to emigrate abroad and for skilled professionals to seek better education and living for their children.

The universality of the drain brain phenomenon is not denied; however, its affliction on developing countries is more accentuated than in developed ones. Thus, one may look at the brighter side of transforming brain drain to brain gain. Some studies show that the brain drain phenomenon need not deplete a country's valuable human capital and can generate positive effect through smoothed international student and skilled professional mobility that may contribute to the socio-economic, political, and cultural development of home and host countries.

FROM BRAIN DRAIN TO BRAIN GAIN: A WIN-WIN STATE

Given the great efforts undertaken by Arab Gulf countries in accomplishing their rapid economic development and ensuring a generous state of social wellbeing for their citizens, and engaging in the task of edifying a state of diversified knowledge economy at the dawn of the fourth Industrial Revolution, one is curious to observe and follow up the endeavor of this human civilizational experience in the midst of a harsh environment and challenging circumstances.

Increased and sustainable efforts and participation geared toward reforming higher education systems and adapting international standards of quality in education and research advanced by the internationalization of education process opportunities, lead Arab Gulf countries to consider such components as catalysts to attain diversified economies less reliant on the oil and gas industries, which are depleting over the next decades. The provision of multiple programs by diverse international sources and that appeal to the needs of the labor market (private and public) has enabled the Gulf countries, particularly UAE, to engage in the formation of needed hard- and soft-skilled labor to support the perceived knowledge economy and to realize a labor force proportional to nationalization in commercial banking, human resource management, insurance, and tourism and hospitality sectors (Mashood et al., 2014).

The provision of transnational higher education in different arrangements in the Gulf region has contributed to a reduction in the number of students seeking higher education overseas. Since the 9/11 attacks, the majority of Gulf States students have preferred enrollment in the established international branch campuses at home instead of acquiring education abroad. This trend has brought about a noticeable reduction in the substantial currency outflow for expenditures geared toward overseas education, either government funded education or private individual education spending.

The hub university cities implemented in the Arab Gulf States aim at attracting international students from Africa, the MENA region, and South Asia. The future graduates of these institutions are potential job seekers in the Gulf States. They may enter the local job market of the scare-labor Gulf state economies to fill the high-skill labor demand in those states. The Adherence to the process of internationalization through higher education, quality assurance, and scientific research standards along with efforts to attract domestically notable universities, will benefit host countries by attracting an international reputation and may develop the established hub into a cultural and knowledge hub to conduct advanced research programs for the local economies as well as for global challenges. Besides, numerous innovative and flexible modes of education delivery, such as part-time and full-time study, have been introduced by these diverse transnational education institutions in the Gulf States, offering an opportunity for the older population to acquire their education while holding their full-time job.

One of the noticeable consequences of the results accrued to host Gulf States of transnational education is the increase in the rate of participation by women in tertiary education due to the increased capacity provided by local governmental, private, and foreign institutions.

Finally, from one side there is no denial of the lucrative and profitable motive behind the transnational move of local higher education institutions to foreign countries due to declining or cut state funding and lower student enrollment. However, a survey by Knight (Knight, 2006) found that the main drivers for the internationalization of traditional non-profit universities are usually to enrich research and knowledge capacity and to raise cultural understanding.

On the other hand, Canadian and Australian universities are encouraging students at their home campuses to study for a semester or take some course credit hours at their international branch campuses in order to become exposed and assimilate an understanding of a foreign culture. Spanish private universities have become involved in such student exchange programs with Dubai universities at the MBA level. Such manifestations are organized through efforts and collaboration between different universities in different countries. The objectives aim at solidifying international relations in terms of promoting higher quality education, building strong diverse scientific research partnerships and collaboration, and gearing efforts toward establishing multiple student and faculty exchange programs.

CONCLUSION

The internationalization of higher education offers an opportunity to reevaluate the phenomenon of studying abroad or cross-bordering education from home universities to international branch campuses. The internationalization of higher education and its expansion and the strengthening of distance learning, have made it necessary to reform higher education systems in developing countries in order to adjust to edicts of the fourth industrial revolution and to curb the brain drain paradox, or to make it more advantageous for home countries. Internationalization of higher education, and common human challenges have reshaped cooperation and collaboration between education institutions and nations. A young and educated generation, motivated by the pursuit of entrepreneurial spirit along with the gained lessons from successful crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in emerging economies, has rendered the recovery of skilled personnel lost to brain drain possible by opening different creative conduits, promoting higher quality education by seizing the opportunity of transnational education and related activities, improving conditions of livelihood in the home country, broadening, and investing in diverse collaboration, cooperation, and partnerships among and between nations.

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